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Grandparenting: A Joyous Responsibility

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Grandparenting

A Joyous Responsibility

*My grandmothers were strong.
They followed plows and bent to toil.
They moved through fields sowing seed.
They touched earth and grain grew.
—Margaret Abigail Walker*



Whether your grandmother was an ample baker of cherry pies or the slim matriarch who ran a family and a business with strength, you owe much to her. Whether your grandfather was a businessman, a farmer, or a laborer, it is from his work and being that you gathered your existence.

In a recent study of 300 children and 300 grandparents, the bond between grandchildren and grandparents was found to be second in emotional power and influence only to the parent-child relationship. The same research revealed that although only 5 percent of the children experienced an intimate relationship with their grandparents, the children as a group indicated they felt a close, natural connection with their grandparents and a strong, emotional need for close attachment to at least one grandparent. When the bond was broken or not acknowledged by the grandparent, the children felt wounded, as if a vital part of themselves were missing.

In today's society, when many grandparents and grandchildren are separated by geography and lifestyles, we might easily overlook the importance of grandparents. Responsible Christian grandparents want to leave a lasting legacy to their grandchildren.

The psalmist wrote, "O God, thou hast taught me from my youth: and hitherto have I declared thy wondrous works. Now also when I am old and gray-

headed, O God, forsake me not; until I have shewed thy strength unto this generation, and thy power to every one that is to come" (Ps. 71:17-18).

Grandparents have the joyous responsibility of showing God's strength and power to the generations that follow. Men and women who commit themselves to godly grandparenting will reap a bounty of rewards and benefits.

Biological renewal. The grandparent who looks into the face of his grandchild looks into a window that opens on the future, a future he himself will be unable to enter. Even as life is shortening for the grandparent, life continues through the grandchild. Many grandparents find peace and contentment in the knowledge that their lives will go on through their children's children.

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Emotional renewal.

One grandmother recently remarked, "My grandchildren keep me from getting lonesome. They help me forget about all my problems." The primary relationship between grandchild and grandparent should be affectionate and recreational. It involves very few of the rigorous responsibilities of parenting.

This relaxed feeling provides a blissful atmosphere for the child and often results in feelings of affirmation and love that build his self-esteem.

We have all seen those heavily padded paddles in gift shops, lovingly labeled "Grandma's Paddle." A child can be at peace with his grandparents. He will be disciplined, certainly, but usually by his parents.

Vicarious enjoyment. Even as a grandparent proudly pulls his "brag book" of photographs from a pocket, he relishes the accomplishments, beauty, and talents of his grandchildren as if they were his

BY RONALD E. HAWKINS

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Photo by Brian Sullivan

own. Happy are grandparents who share vicariously in the achievements of their younger selves.

Those who wish to be godly G-R-A-N-D-P-A-R-E-N-Ts should consider the following.

Godliness. Grandparents who model biblical holiness leave their grandchildren an invaluable legacy. Blessed is the child whose grandparents remind him that he is being prayed for every day of

his life. Grandparents who love the Bible, believe in prayer, and consistently model biblical holiness leave a rich impression on the minds of their grandchildren.

Respect. Grandparents need to teach the young to respect the authority of God, His Word, and the institutions authorized by that Word: family, home, and government. Blessed is the child whose grandparents insist on respect where it is due.

Affection. Everyone needs to know he is loved by someone. Parents love their children, but frequently in the busy and demanding environment of the home the assurance of love is lost. Grandparents are usually not attached to such busyness, nor to a high level of expectation. Grandma is happy if her grandchildren eat their cookies and drink their milk. Grandpa is happy if the young ones listen to his stories. Grandparents should be the incarnation of unconditional love. God's love is often defined against the backdrop of unconditional acceptance. Such an accepting love does much to build self-esteem and confidence in the life of a child. Blessed is the child who can run to his grandparents' arms when growing up is difficult.

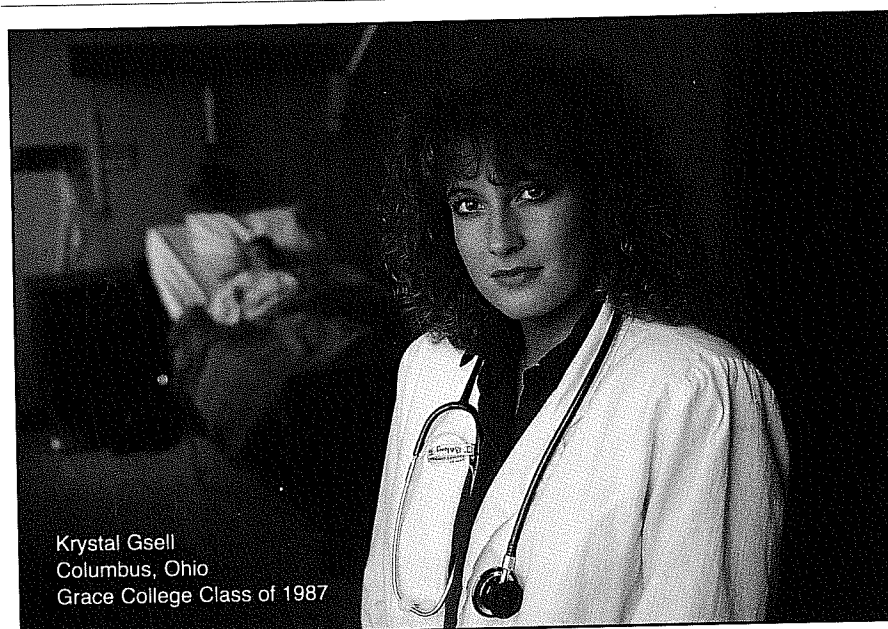
Needy. We live in a society where people are taught to hide their vulnerability, but grandparents are needy people. They cannot go too fast or too far. They tire easily. Often they must be helped by an outstretched hand. Blessed is the child who learns to reach out with joy. Such a child learns to be tender and compassionate.

Devotion. Grandparents often model the true values of marriage. Though their youth and beauty are gone, in them grandchildren can still see tenderness and devotion between a man and a woman. The grandchild will see that friendship and devotion are the ties that truly bind a marriage in love. Blessed is the child whose grandparents love one another.

Patience. Though patience is a fruit of the Holy Spirit working in our lives, mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters are not always patient. Blessed is the child whose grandparents seem to have all the time in the world for him. Grandparents who allow time for perfection to grow, who instill confidence that the task will be mastered someday, if not today, are truly wise.

Affirmation. Children need to be challenged by affirmation. Grandparents who help their grandchildren see how far they have come, how gifted they are, and what joy they bring, help these children go far in a world where self-esteem is regularly shattered. Blessed are the children whose grandparents bring them to the celebration of what is, and call them away from fear over what is not yet.

Reaching out. In the words of Erik Erikson, grandparents must make sure



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"they end their lives with integrity and not with despair." Nothing is more damaging or unappealing to the young than an older person who sits around moaning about how bad things have become. Stagnation and negativism are dangerous traps in which grandparents can flounder. Blessed is the child whose grandparents believe every day is a gift from God, and who seek to fill it by reaching out in the power of God's Spirit

to minister in Jesus' name.

Energy. Grandparents need to acquaint their grandchildren with the reality of spiritual energy. Though the physical body is weaker than it was in the days of youth, when spiritual energy shines from the eyes of their grandparents, children learn of God's supernatural power. Blessed is the child whose grandparents teach him of the power that brings a man through decay and death with dignity and places him on the other side with joy and renewed vitality.

Naturalness. Grandparents eschew artificial eyelashes, false fingernails, and plastic surgery. Though Grandma's hair may be shaded with white and her soft skin may have a few more wrinkles, she stands with womanly dignity, her character shaped through years of labor and love. Blessed is the child whose grandparents have not succumbed to an artificial way of establishing worth, but who move naturally in the beauty of grace and love.

Traditions. Grandparents need to keep alive a body of traditions that give unique definitions to their families. Pass on a sense of family heritage, tell stories of ancestors, family milestones, and traditions. These roots in tradition give a family a sense of pride that can be an anchor and a guiding inspiration for grandchildren. Blessed are the children whose grandparents have provided them with traditions that serve as an anchor and as an inspiration to move ahead. They will construct a meaningful and worthwhile present based on an appreciation of the past.

A woman lives in an apartment for the elderly in sunny Florida, but usually she is not aware of the sunshine. Her mind wanders, she forgets things, and she has difficulty recalling the names of her children. She will prepare a meal, walk away, and return only to wonder who left food on her table. Her children care for her lovingly and allow her to maintain her independence, but she is not what she used to be.

Her grandchildren remember her as she was—a lovely woman with a voice as bright as sunshine and a contagious laugh. She would talk about her deceased husband with tenderness and reverence, instilling respect for a man her grandchildren never knew. The way she sang "The Love of God" moved the cousins and aunts to tears. Whenever she spent the night with her children she would take each grandchild into her confidence and whisper a secret: "You are my favorite. I love you so much!" She wrote letters to her grandchildren who were at college, her spidery script proclaiming over and over, "You are so precious to me. I love you so much!"

Her stories, her funny songs, her letters, her fried apple pies—everything about grandma was amazing. Grandma was love in a sweet-smelling bundle. She was everything a grandparent could be.

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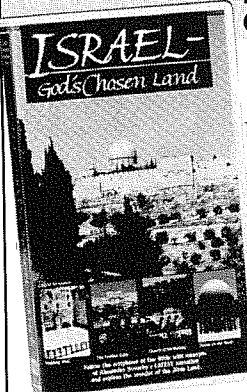
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